THE WET MAN IS NOT AFRAID OF RAIN

SURVIVAL AND DEFIANCE IN THE LAND OF OIL

(1998)

IMAGES OF SMART BOMBS

During the Gulf War, when the American watchword was "support the troops" —in other words, "don't question anything"—I found it more difficult than usual to escape television. Everyone I visited, it seemed, kept the living room screen aglow. My acquaintances would point, puffed up with optimistic excitement, and I'd see the luminous rays and stars of smart bombs swooping down. A captive and self-captivated press transmitted received spectacles while obeying guidelines laid down by the Pentagon. Why exactly were we attacking? Iraq had invaded Kuwait, the newscasters said, and so in the interests of humanity the UN "coalition," in which my country always seemed to take the lead, would liberate Kuwait. Kuwait undoubtedly deserved to be liberated. Iraq had announced a "comprehensive, eternal and inseparable merger" with it—in other words, annexation, accompanied by torture, hostage-taking, murder, theft, destruction of libraries and oil fields, etcetera. Iraq's actions in Kuwait were evil, and evil ought to be undone. Had we followed this procedure every time one nation invaded another, I might have believed in it. But not long since, my own country had invaded Panama and

brought its head of state home to be imprisoned for the duration. What was really going on? For Kuwait's sake I was not *against* the Gulf War, but I was not quite for it, either. I reserved judgment, which is to say I didn't really know and didn't care.

After Iraq's stunningly rapid surrender, my fellow citizens and I forgot about the campaign with our customary facility.[1] The United Nations had imposed sanctions. My country's permanent representative to the UN crowed that those sanctions, which were meant to be in effect for six months or so, would create "clear incentives for rapid implementation and trade-offs which will in stages produce a return to normalcy and non-belligerency in the Gulf."[2] In the eighth year of the sanctions, I went to Iraq, knowing nothing. My friends vaguely remembered a dictator, smart bombs, an easy war in which a few Americans had unfortunately died.

Tired flags and cigarette-stained seats marked the Jordanian side of the border. Carpets hung out to air upon the barbed wire fence. Then came a brief drive between fences, and I had entered Iraq, where one's eye first fell upon a representation of President Saddam Hussein who waved, palm outward, in the customs office. Before long, he'd crowded out all my visions of smart bombs.

IMAGES OF SADDAM

There he was in a desert gas station, wearing a sporty white shirt and a white safari hat, blue sky and oil derricks behind him. He'd been idealized onto a concrete slab, and an Iraqi flag flew over his head. In a restaurant in Baghdad, the golden hands of a clock struggled but could not move, the mechanism evidently broken, but the clock face itself retained its pristine integrity, being the face of one President Saddam Hussein, Chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council, who stood in a blue suit, ready for all. There he was again next door in the barbershop, not merely replicated but triplicated, firstly in his blue suit—portrayed from a different angle, however—secondly in a white Arab headdress, and thirdly in a black and white *tête-à-tête* with his Minister of Defense. The pair of cigar-smoking old barbers slowly snipped with scissors, scraped with straight razors, powdered customers' ears, and the radio, calling prayer time, to which nobody in the shop paid attention, played a few bars from "Scheherazade." (As I sat down, one of the barbers said, "Welcome, mister," but everyone else looked away.) Exchange a hundred dollars, and you'll receive a virtual armload of bank notes bearing Saddam Hussein's likeness in blue and violet. His countenance is the first you see when you enter Iraq, and the last when you leave. In the reconstruction of ancient Babylon, his name has been engraved in the bricks. I remember how his portrait hung over the amusement park, where some of the rides no longer worked thanks to the sanctions. The roller coaster still functioned, with two cars at a time on its immense naked scaffold. Veiled ladies sat darkly; families too poor to go out to restaurants made picnics on the shabby benches, gazing at the hissing whirling glow-tube-studded airplane ride.

Loudspeakers were still singing happy birthday to Saddam two days after the blessed event.

By the end of my first day in Iraq, the portraits of Saddam had already made my eyes begin to glaze. In my mind's eye I see the victory arch for the Iran-Iraq War, with genuine bullet-pierced Iranian helmets in concrete comprising a ghastly gravel, then the hands of Saddam Hussein, gigantically magnified, holding crossed scimitars. I remember thinking that only perpetual processions and rallies could have rendered this place functional, appropriate. Beneath the huge span of this anthropomorphic arch lay the usual lifeless feeling; nobody was there but a security man with a leveled machine gun. Later, when I asked why he had been needed there, an Iraqi laughed: "Maybe Ali Baba is take the hands!" —And in Kut, in a restaurant whose livid tomatoes and kebabs were clustered with flies, I asked where the photo of Saddam was. "Oh, he's our hero," said the proprietor, thumbs-up. "I'm cleaning his picture so that I can kiss it." Then he scornfully laughed, and so did all his minions.

But Saddam had his true-blue supporters who raised up his image out of more than obligation. I remember the patriotic old lawyer in Baghdad who was proud of his president's defiance, the art gallery owner who called Saddam his hero because "he make us a new life. New street, new everything. But he is like a mango in the street and the imperialist dog come to steal." Outside Iraq, where I could more often assume adulation to be unconcerned, the Palestinians I met praised him. The complacent and self-serving American image of Saddam is that he is an extremist. He is. But the whole Middle East is also extreme—which is to say, the Middle Eastern agenda lies closer to the Iraqi one than to "ours": (1) Unite the Arabs. (2) Resist the bullying of the secular, oil-addicted West. (3) Fight Israel.[3] (4) Uphold Islam through faith, fortitude, nobility and defiance.

I remember one Jordanian who bought me a Sprite and said, "It uplifts our hearts whenever Hezbollah kills Jews." He explained that Israel had been founded in a secret deal with the British, who'd had to play along after the Jews in their cunning invented the poison gas which wiped out Hitler and the German army. He was not the only one who believed this. Of course this man admired Saddam, and so did his militant Palestinian friends, because Saddam fomented against "the so-called Israeli state." "We always believe that whenever 'Israel' finds an opportunity to harm Iraq, it will not hesitate to do so."[4] With equal glibness, Saddam spoke of "the Arab nation" of which Palestine, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Iraq were a part, and Syria a traitorous part, and Israel no part. Iran was not Arab; Iran was untrustworthy, alien, Asian. Saddam had it all figured out, and there will always be people who like that, as well as people who through the narrowness and accident of personal experience turn into acolytes, such as the Kuwaiti army veteran I met who'd been kept hostage by the Iraqis for fourteen months during the Gulf War. Amazingly, he adored Saddam. "In Kuwait or Saudi Arabia, when America says yes

you must say yes. But when America says yes, Saddam says no. Please, Mr. William, you must name your firstborn son Saddam." He swore by Allah—and it was Friday, too, a holy day—that his captors had treated him well. They'd fed him chicken once a day—this was obviously before the sanctions had bitten deep. He'd been afraid of execution only for a month. After they let him go, his own government detained him for five months more in a dungeon where he literally had to sleep in his waste, because he was a Bedouin, which meant that his grandfather had come from Iraq. Now the Kuwaitis were busy expelling Bedouins from jobs and citizenship. After thirteen years in the military, they wrote on his passport that he had NO WORK and his place of birth was UNDEFINED. So Saddam was his hero. (But I noticed that he requested of me a visa to America.)

How popular was Saddam really? There was no way to know. If an Iraqi whispered to me in confidence that he didn't like his president, I'd ask him if he'd discussed the matter with any of his friends, and he'd turn fearful and appalled. Meanwhile, Saddam's images proliferated as insidiously as television commercials and billboard advertisements in my country; he was everywhere; his dark moustache blotted every wall; he was built into the landscape. I remember one strange night in my first hotel in Baghdad, the four- or five-star Al-Rasheed, a place with many nice touches, such as the granite threshold, upon whose demonically caricatured face of a certain American president feet had to tramp in order to enter and exit the lobby, their heel-clicks punctuating the legend, BUSH IS CRIMINAL. At any rate, I was in my room, trying without success to telephone someone, and the instant I hung up, the television, which they had told me didn't work, and whose glowing red power indicator had never stopped shining, turned itself on most shoutingly, and I saw joyful crowds, and Saddam Hussein making a speech. He was wearing dark military green, with a red and blue sash across his chest. He showed his perfect white teeth. Of course I didn't understand a word he said, except for the words *Saddam Hussein,* which he repeated every now and then, evidently referring to himself in the third person just as he did in his other speeches. Then a rapturous song began, booming from the television itself and also from speakers in the bathroom ceiling. They started singing happy birthday to Saddam in Arabic, and the fireworks went off.

IMAGES OF AMIRIYA

Yes, Saddam had tortured and extrajudicially executed people; yes, he'd murdered Kurds by the thousands; he'd employed gas warfare; he'd flouted the Geneva rules on the care of POWs.[5] "Definitely the human rights abuses in Iraq are beyond description," an Amnesty International spokesman told me. "These are things that have been going on for years and years and years. I personally have interviewed a physician who said, and I quote, 'I was stationed at a hospital where other physi-

cians were forced to amputate the ears of army deserters. During the night they brought in buses of blindfolded soldiers and the senior officials were forced to conduct the amputations. Other soldiers had their foreheads branded with a hot stamp ...'"[6] But against the images of smart bombs which enthralled the families of the bombardiers, Saddam for his part could juxtapose the image of Amiriya shelter, that huge concrete lifesaver in which a pair of American smart bombs had incinerated 403 civilians during the Gulf War. An official pamphlet at my hotel called this event "the most horrifying U.S. crime ever committed against the people of Iraq... professional killers are always killers no matter when or where... U.S. excuses are merely [a] desperate attempt to cover up the impudence and enormity of the crime."[7] The first bomb had opened the way. The second bomb had twisted the metal rods within the concrete ceiling. I gazed up through the hole through which American death had entered, and perceived flying and singing birds. It was cool and dank inside. My driver prayed for the victims, as he always did, and sternly motioned for me to cross myself. The blackened, blistered concrete walls were hung with photographs and wreaths. There were also photographs of the corpse retrieval crews, some with masks over their mouths, I suppose for protection against the stench. I saw photographs of them lifting corpses on planks, a photograph of a row of charred corpses on the sidewalk. A black-clothed woman who'd lost her sister and children came to me and silently pointed out the sheets of scorched human skin and clothing stuck to the walls. She took me downstairs, needing to show me more skin, lavender and tan patches of it, in places not washed off by the flood of water when the bomb had shattered the pipes and drowned the people it didn't roast. The woman's sandals click-clicked in the dark. Pointing to the ceiling, she pantomimed for me burning people being flung against the ceiling, trying to protect themselves with outstretched hands, and I saw the blackened skin of hands sticking like squashed burned gloves up there. She showed me the solarized shadows of incinerated human beings on the wall.

When an Iraqi asked me what I thought about Amiriya, I said to him that this achievement of our smart bombs sickened me. I also said that I believed it to be an accident. I said that in war the innocent always suffered and probably always would. He smiled angrily.

"AMERICA IS BIG PROBLEM FOR THE WORLD"

To ordinary Iraqis, the long quiet cruelty of sanctions was a series of Amiriyas. My fellow Americans (the few who remembered that Iraq existed) spoke of punishing Saddam, of driving him out, of keeping the pressure on him until he divulged the location of every last crypt or cache of poison. But the men, women and children who had nothing to do with weapons or government failed to see why they had to suffer. I sometimes spoke with a few of them in the nighttime, when there weren't so many

security men to take note of where I went, what I ordered in restaurants, and whom I learned from. Evening's light-tubes splashed their celestial blood on huddles of fruit; yes, there was a little color; I saw a few clumps of people in the grey twilight. The atmosphere was oil and exhaust. A crowd of calves stood in the darkness by their slaughterer. One was already on the ground, wriggling and bleeding. Why were they killing such young animals? Couldn't they feed them? I wanted to question my guide, but he reflexively replied that it was dangerous to ask. We were in Saddam City now. A man stood in the dirty darkness selling nuts and seeds. My guide said that he had a good face, so we went and talked to him. "Very good for your job!" my guide would crow later. To you it may seem ordinary that I went into a house and spoke with a family. But if you are a foreign journalist in Iraq, then unfortunately it is a rare and special thing to do that. It was always rare not to be watched, controlled, deflected.

The man said that before the government had given every family one bottle of cooking oil and some food. (He must have been speaking of the UN food basket, which I'll get to later.) Now times were worse, and the government gave two bottles of cooking oil and no food. My guide's family still got their staples at the midpoint of each month, but they lived in central Baghdad, not Saddam City which always seemed to sink to the bottom of every list.

Leaving behind the smell of fat, dirt and blood from the slaughtered cattle, we accompanied the man to the alleys where among the black silhouettes of women standing and squatting in dark waste places, narrow blocks of access had been quarried out of the night. Here, behind a wall with the slogan in Arabic DOWN WITH AMERICA, the man lived with his wife in a concrete flat where we sat on poor carpet beneath a stopped clock and a large poster of President Saddam Hussein saluting, while on the television President Saddam Hussein was speaking at great length.

The man showed me a doctor's certificate affirming his production of viable sperm. He insisted that it was the embargo which had prevented him and his wife in their nine years of marriage from bringing a baby into the world. They couldn't afford one. His wife suffered from many illnesses, he went on. She especially needed Spanish asthma medicine. Before the embargo, it had cost 25 Iraqi dinars. Now it cost 7,000. What was more, before the Gulf War she'd never coughed the way she was coughing now. He worried that some American poison might have hurt her—"chemicals to make her sick," he said, and I thought how strange it was that his fears were mirror-images of American fears about Iraqi toxins. The man longed to send his wife to Jordan for an operation, but of course he couldn't afford to. You had to be pretty well-connected to get out of Iraq.[8]

He was thirty-five and grey. He looked fifty. Kneeling there on the concrete, he said that he'd fought in Kuwait. He said that when the American airplanes had come and started bombing, he'd wept, and so had his comrades. "No food, no gun," interposed my guide with a shrug.

"How was it before the Americans came?"

"Very easy at first. Just stand by with the gun. Didn't see any people from Kuwait. Everybody go outside to Saudi Arabia and like that"—a good indictment of the Iraqis' invasion, I thought. "Eat and sleep in soldier shelter two meters deep."

"Were you happy with that first victory?"

"Very happy. Because some problem before: Government from Kuwait export too much petrol and lower the price. Saddam Hussein talk with Kuwait and say please stop because already we poor from Iranian war. But Kuwait do the bad thing."[9]

"And then when the Americans and the Saudis came and started bombing, what did you think?"

"They say, 'We are Muslim.' So why the Saudi help America?"

"And what did Saddam Hussein say?"

"He say everybody in Iraq take the gun. America very dangerous. Government of America and British black heart, and government Saudi also black heart."

When the Americans came, the man had no water for three days. He was hiding in a tomato field. He lived on tomatoes. Once a British pilot saw him and let him alone. The Americans were more "strict" than that, he said. He believed that if an American pilot had seen him, he'd be dead now. He said that it had meant death to be in any car or an airplane. He'd fled on foot to Basrah.

"And what do you think of Saddam Hussein now?" I asked him.

"He is hero of the Middle East. To thirty-three countries President Saddam Hussein say no and is fighting."

There were several people in the room, and so maybe the man felt that he had to say that. On the other hand, maybe to him it was true.

"And the UN?" I inquired.

"UN lying. Is very lying, Mr. Butler." (Richard Butler was the chairman of the UN Special Commission which monitored Iraqi weapons.) "And America is father of the United Nations," he said. "China, Britain, France, Russia follow only America. America is big problem for the world."

His grey-faced wife brought us tea. I thanked her and asked him: "If the embargo is lifted, what's the first thing you'll do?"

"Make some lamb, a gift for my God."

SANCTIONS

A man walks down the street in a nice shirt. You get closer and see the tiny holes.

Three brothers share a shirt. Each day another brother wears it.

A woman stands begging beside her pale, sweating child. She doesn't have enough money for a taxi to the hospital.

If I were to tell you what sanctions are doing to Iraq, I could portray the gutted offices of Iraqi Airlines; I could write about the many places filled with the smell of burned garbage, narrowed eyes, and bitter, hateful looks from people who hated *me.*

I could tell you how in Baghdad one saw DOWN USA everywhere. But more often the effect is a subtler decrepitude, the minor stays of life unraveling, just as the slabs are coming loose at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, that immense soldier-guarded mound across which nobody ever seems to crawl (down inside lie circular cases full of medals and pistols, three of Saddam Hussein's very own machine guns used during his revolution, and then the helmet of an Israeli pilot "shot down by our great forces in 1967"). But the metal column fashioned after an Iraqi date palm, beset by black cubes and daggers which represent the black hearts of the Iranians, still stands. The medals and pistols remain shiny.

I had thought I'd see worse. When night spilled over a broken sidewalk glistening beneath powerful light tubes, yellow plastic jugs and red soda cans so vivid in the shop windows, I could still find ice-cream-eating crowds, cars, and palm trees. And entering a supermarket, I even saw much unexpired merchandise from Jordan and Turkey.[10] —"What do you want?" the clerk shouted at me. "It's not weapons." —"And where does this come from?" I said, pointing to another shelf. "That's soap," he said so bitterly. "When we get dirty, are we allowed to wash ourselves?" Weary of his hatred, I went out, and struck up an acquaintance with the former civil engineer who now sold tea on the street. Later I returned to my hotel. In the room I made a telephone call, and had just gotten my party on the line when the patchwork of frayed wires under the desk came undone.

Everything else is coming undone, too. If you don't believe me, ask the old man in frogeye glasses who used to work for the government; now, like so many others, he works three jobs at once. One gives him four thousand dinars, another twelve thousand, and the third seven thousand. (Across the street from him, a sweet little vendeuse sells Turkish biscuits for five hundred dinars. Before the embargo, one Iraqi dinar was three dollars. Now, one dollar is 1500 to 2000 dinars. A pack of cigarettes cost a thousand dinars.) The man has thirteen children. How can he carry on?

Peer inside the almost idle shoe factory where six pictures of Saddam Hussein adorn the waiting room. The manager sits resigned, relaxed. He gazes down the street at a hot and dreary emptiness of fences, barbed wire, rust-roofed sheds of companies closed by the embargo. His Italian-made manufacturing equipment is failing. Rows of dead machines stand up against the wall. Before sanctions, his workers turned out 720 pairs of shoes a day. Now they produce only 240, and Iraqis need shoes no less than they did eight years ago, and his workers need wages no less.

Visit the old Christian who runs a delicatessen in the center of Baghdad. His son in California recently died of a stroke. He wants to know how his grandchildren are. He's written his daughter-in-law, but received no answer. Was she indifferent, or does the embargo prevent communication between them? Not knowing breaks his heart. I mailed a letter for him in California, but I wonder whether he'll ever receive a reply.

In a dirty-pale two-room house, a husband and wife live with their five children (two more children have already died from leukemia). They pay ten thousand a month for their place. "We eat some food bad for animal, for *animal*," the husband says, showing me a large plate inside the refrigerator, to which still cling a few patches of feculent yellow mush, because while in Jordan you can get half a roast chicken for a dinar and a half, which is less than the price of a medium-length taxi ride, in Iraq it will be several thousand dinars, which might be less than a month's wages. Certainly this householder has little hope of eating chicken. Every now and then, he supplements his income by buying and selling gasoline (five dinars a liter, remember). The mush costs a hundred dinars per meal. The man says to me, "You tell them, it very hard life and our best wishes to United States."

If you don't care to dine with his family, then take lunch at the fast-food place, with its marble, its burgers, and its student couples from the technical college across the street, the girls usually not veiled. The couple next to me couldn't afford to get married, for which they blamed the embargo. The boy used his Brazilian-made car as a taxi, but it broke down frequently, and he spent more fixing it than he took in from his fares. Let's call him Ali. The girl's name was Maryam. "My love," Ali said of her, clasping her hands. Whenever he looked at her, his eyes shone. They touched their heads together and whispered. It seemed that Maryam was offering to prostitute herself to me, in order to pay for her wedding ring. But I was sad; I couldn't face it.

In a fancy secondary school for girls, wires dangled from a socket in the wall of the principal's office. They didn't have enough pencils. Pencils were embargoed in case some cunning Iraqi pulled the graphite out for use in nuclear weapons. The teachers' hands fluttered. They all wanted to ask me whether the embargo would be lifted soon or not. I said I didn't think so, and I was sorry. A teacher said: "I have four children and I can get no milk. What can I do?" I had no answer, no solution ... The girls who had gained perfect scores in their examinations came and brought me sweets on a tray. They spoke accentless English. I wanted to talk to them. I wanted to take their photograph. "No," said the principal coldly.

So I drove instead to a secondary school for girls in Saddam City, where the faded tile floors of the headmistress's office matched the faded portrait of Saddam Hussein. More than five hundred pupils attended, aged eighteen to twenty-eight. Some of them posed for my camera beneath a banner now a week out of date: ALL OUR LOVE FOR SADDAM HUSSEIN THE LEADER ON HIS BIRTHDAY. The headmistress, who had run the place for fourteen years, said that before the embargo there'd been plenty of pens, paper, and supplies for chemistry and physics class—not anymore. They used to have air conditioning. She said that her pupils sometimes came to school weak and tired. She showed me broken handles and padlocks on the storerooms, cracked stairs, rotten desks. The courtyard had been an algae-blanketed mosquito-marsh for four years now. In a classroom, out of four lights, one

was working. The headmistress said that in many other schools in Saddam City, the classrooms had no light at all.

Surely both the sheared-off concrete in the steps to the second floor, and the mosquitoey marsh which the headmistress bemoaned could have been overcome by determined hand labor if nothing else. But who could pay the laborer enough to feed his family? In Baghdad's too-empty streets, so many people gave up trying to fix inessential things, even if the malfunctions were easily reparable. Nothing was so easy anymore, even if some could cheer themselves with defiance. "Believe it or not, we are challenging the US," a man said proudly. It was hot, of course, and the bad water makes them sick. Jordan and any other country could show off many a broken place or soul, which is why I don't want to exaggerate the misery I saw in Baghdad. With its teeming Friday market and its impromptu soccer games, it remains in far better shape than many other places I've been (parts of Madagascar, for instance). But many of the appearances of "development" were becoming mere husks, like the worn cassettes which people tap like decks of cards before they play them. And when you shook people's hands in the bare-bulbed market booths, they might feel sticky and unclean.

SECURITY

Iraq, as I said, is a jail, and the UN are jailkeepers. But they are not the only wardens.

I tried to take my hundredth photograph of a Saddam Hussein poster but two soldiers leaped toward me with leveled guns, because the wall behind the photo belonged to a security installation.

An old beggar with sores on his lip and an oozing handshake begged me for cash so that he could go to Jordan or Syria to finish his studies in French or English literature or philology. I'd squeezed off a camera image when a soldier, green and immaculate, quickstepped to my side and said: "Photography forbidden." He didn't confiscate the film; he was pleasant, but the beggar and I decided to part ways.

A security man warned me not to bring anyone I met into my hotel room or it would be problematic for both my guest and myself.

When I got clearance from the Ministry of Information to go to Saddam Hussein's birthday parade in the secure city of Tikrit, we had to pass through six checkpoints on the way from Baghdad.[11] —"No one can go inside!" the driver laughed.

"So how can the citizens celebrate their president's birthday?" I asked naively.

"They watch on television," he said.

Indeed, the streets were virtually empty in Tikrit—empty of spectators, that is, unless we count the green crowds of soldiers who filled the stadiums crowned by multiple portraits of Saddam Hussein. And they were participants in the drama; they shouted, waved their machine guns about, and happily boomed, "Down, down, USA!" In the street, men in blue whirled white handkerchiefs, chanting, *"Saddam,*

Saddam!" and Saddam himself was on the reviewing stand two or three storeys up among his highest generals and ministers, one of whom pontificated behind bullet-proof glass. I saw many, many other things, but then the security troops, worrying that I might be a spy, ordered me to put my notebook away. I'd get in trouble, the driver said anxiously. And the almost spectatorless procession went on. It was all a sort of laboratory demonstration under the controlled conditions obtained by excluding unknown variables—that is, the Iraqi population at large. Their absence, I thought, spoke ill for Saddam Hussein. A man I met had close-cropped hair, thinning on top, stubbled cheeks, a moustache, and narrow eyes which never looked at me, although later they did look at me when he whispered: "Believe me, not all Iraqis like him."

One day I asked a security man what he and his colleagues were worried about, and he said spies. There were three kinds: Jewish spies, CIA spies and Iranian spies. During the war with Iran, his friend Yusuf turned out to be an Iranian spy. They kept him for six months before they shot him. Two days prior to his execution, the security man was allowed to visit him. The security man said: "Please tell me. Is it true or not?" —"True," said Yusuf. "I am so happy because now I will be a hero. I love the Iranian government." And the security man said to him, "I'm so, so sorry. It's bad for you, bad for your family. See how they're crying!" Yusuf was playing dominoes. He didn't care. He was a martyr for jihad. The security forces didn't attend his funeral. But for years afterward, they hounded the family—for the protection of the nation, the security man said. Everything was justified; no one was innocent. But in my brief time in Iraq I saw many a man who'd done nothing that I knew of touch his forehead and thank Allah for not having been stopped at certain checkpoints swarming with dark-green-clad soldiers.

ILLNESS

The pediatric hospital was named, of course, after Saddam Hussein.[12] It was a public hospital unlike the expensive and prestigious Saint Raphael Hospital, so they now had to perform many operations without anesthetic. The doctor I met insisted: "Most of Iraq's children have been affected by sanctions." He said that there was no more serum for vaccinations, no media for blood tests. A wrinkled infant wept in its black-robed mother's lap as she slowly rocked it on her knee. The doctor said he'd already given the child two bottles of blood obtained from relatives. What was wrong? An undiagnosed case, said the doctor with a shrug. Maybe it would die. "Now we treat according to the availability of resources, not according to the prognosis," he said. In the next bed lay a bright yellow child, his diaper stained also a luminous yellow-green—jaundice, of course. Then I saw the little child whose skin was speckled scarlet—leukemia—and then the little boy in the cast-off army shirt who had chronic diarrhea, attended by his large-eyed mother who wore a black and

purple headscarf and sat fanning the flies away.

How could one say which of these cases were caused by sanctions and which by life? I remembered the people in Saddam City who, standing in puddles or on mounds of refuse, would tell me that their slum was beautiful, that they'd never had it so good; then my exasperated driver, wanting to help me write the most lugubrious story possible, would browbeat them until somebody began to hang his head and complain about the embargo. Moreover, Saddam City's park-sized expanses of waste and garbage were far from ubiquitous in Iraq. When I asked a man why some localities remained rich and clean, he said: "I don't know why. You can ask Saddam Hussein." Which misery should I caption "embargo," and which "preexisting class exploitation"? Well, we do know that during the Gulf War our bombers targeted "Iraqi infrastructure," which included water pumping and filtration plants. The sanctions made it impossible to repair most of them. The logical result: even from bottled water one can get amoebic dysentery, as I did. One of my guides who worked at the Ministry of Information's press center, a relatively well-off man to whom I paid ten dollars for a morning's translation, plus a lunch in one of the driver's fancy restaurants, mourned a child who'd just now died of diarrhea. It had taken the boy a month to die. Rehydration salts and antibiotics might have saved him. And so I looked at the little boy in the cast-off army shirt there in Saddam Pediatric Hospital and wondered whether he would die, too.

He lay beside a girl whose nose would not stop bleeding. And then leukemia personified itself again, in a boy whose stinking belly was swollen pink and purple. The doctor said he felt so sorry. It was useless, too late.

"Gloves, antibiotics, simple things are not available," the doctor said. "When I do bone marrow aspirations, I can use no gloves. When patients with leukemia get chickenpox, they should get gamma globulin, but there is none, so they die..."

Beside him, a septicemic child was sleeping. The doctor said: "We should take a culture to determine the pathogen. But we can't. This patient's only treatment for eleven days has been aspirin. She presented with fever, rigor and septicemia. There are a hundred types of antibiotic and we have only two now."

"Before the embargo, was it any different?"

"I wasn't in Baghdad then, but I was in Tikrit City, and there were many antibiotics available at that time."

A child with leukemia lay weakly, her eyes half closed.

"She has beautiful eyes," I said to the mother.

"If you praise her on her beauty, don't praise her. Help her," the mother replied.

"What would you have me do?"

"End the sanctions," said the mother.

I had nothing to offer but money and candy.

The doctor drew me to the next bed and said: "This case presented with abdominal distillation" (I think he meant distention) "and a mass in the abdomen.

Characteristic of lymphoma. We've seen an increase in lymphomas and leukemias in the area from the south of Baghdad. We think it comes from the depleted uranium in the shells the Americans dropped."

The child had sutures in his stomach. The doctor said: "Already metastasized. We don't have enough resources for chemotherapy. Ninety percent of these patients die. And his prognosis is very bad: Stage three. Malignancy is above and below the diaphragm."

The child's mother said to me: "We sold our furniture to buy drugs for him."

I did not know what to reply.

Next was a wide-eyed, bigheaded nine-year-old child with neuroblastoma. "They sold their house to buy the drugs for their son," the doctor said.

Later, when I went to the UNSCOM office in Baghdad, I asked their press liaison what she had to say about the relation between sanctions and the lack of medicine. "Oh, we don't talk about that," she said.

EXPLANATIONS

A man smiled grimly and said: "We are imprisoned by those others. But anytime Saddam wants to finish, he can finish with Kuwait."

My gallery owner acquaintance asserted: "The reason for the embargo is Israel, and Israel make from Zionists. 'Braham Lincoln, first president of America, he say in his first speech, make careful with Jewish or they make you servant. It's true. Israel is ten times more powerful than America."

The old lawyer was also certain that the embargo was a Zionist measure to destroy Iraq. "America is afraid that these weapons should not be put in the hands of totalitarians, retarded people, Orientals, because there will be no deterrent," he said to me while his secretary served us Turkish coffee in tiny glasses and his partner nodded beneath a giant portrait of Saddam Hussein. "But in the Iraq-Iran war, and in the Gulf War, we proved that we respected the deterrent. Because we didn't use chemical weapons. You Americans have the full right to be proud of the strong economy you have and the very high-tech life you lead. But you do not have the right to become arrogant. You should not feel that you are different from others, some superman, something like that."

It always came down to America. Nobody believed that UNSCOM was anything more than an American puppet, and I don't know enough to say that they were entirely wrong.

SURVIVAL

What could they do about it? They did what they could. They babied engines, cadged jobs, avoided illness, lived and waited watchfully. Everybody worried about guarding and protecting themselves, their possessions, their jobs. Halfway to Basrah, where I had meant to go in order to gaze outward through the bars of the cage, so to speak, the driver's fine new engine, which he'd purchased for over one million dinars (so he said, perhaps in hopes of getting a million dinars from me), overheated, and then the plastic fan shattered. "Many car in Iraq is very tired," said my driver, "since no spare part, so must drive slowly." He was in anguish and terror because his car was his life. Without it, he and his family might sink down to the common level or even the sub-level where in long garbage-strewn stretches of waste children played and families took the stinking evening air. (One night I wanted to meet the children who were kicking a ball over rubbish-fires in one of those rubble-fields. Bald, shouting faces rushed gleefully toward me when I began to take photographs. When they swarmed against me in spite of the driver's warnings, the driver, I suppose thinking he was protecting me, punched two of them to the ground. Then the shouting stopped.) The very next car stopped to help us. "Iraq down, down," the man laughed bitterly to me. The tow truck came. Our new friend offered to pay for it if we didn't have money. But when we arrived in the mechanics' yard, the driver told me urgently not to say hello to anyone. This area had been closer to the Gulf War bombing, so its inhabitants hated America more. I ignored this prohibition and met some friendliness, but also much menace, many raised voices and fists. Under the calligraphed eye, and in between prayers facing Mecca on the oily floor, the mechanics filed, soldered, reamed and welded what they could not replace, lubricating everything with oil, which was incomparably cheap in relation to embargoed parts. They saved the driver. They gave me tea when they learned I was American, muttering, "USA, USA," bitter and troubled but restraining their anger, smiling upon the guest. (I remember particularly a meager, stunted boy, greasy from head to foot, who couldn't have been born much before sanctions began. For most his life he'd been pinched by them. Maybe he didn't think about that; maybe he was "used to it." But he was scared, and he hated me. By the end, he too overcame his natural feelings and smiled at me.) And so the car crept safely back to Baghdad. We never got to Basrah; the driver was afraid to take his car such a great distance again. He continued on in my employ, protecting himself, deflecting me from engine-wearying projects. He did what he needed to do. Maybe the slabs were coming loose at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, but the tomb still covered the corpse. The photo lab with its giant portrait of Saddam Hussein was still printing and selling Konica color prints (no black and white, no Kodak), and Iraq struggled on like the old blue and white Toyota buses with black smoke coming out.

Not everybody had to struggle. (I saw a raised, fenced area of opulent houses.

"This area for government," the man said. "No one can go." Since the end of the Gulf War, Saddam Hussein has allegedly built more than thirty-two mansions. The sanctions hardly touch him.) If you were well connected, you could beat the embargo.[13] Your Iraqi-American relative paid $500 to an Iraqi-American businessman who then made a phone call to his cousin in Baghdad. The cousin telephoned you. You come to his office, and he gave you $450 in cash. (A ten percent commission isn't unreasonable, now, is it?)

And if you weren't well-connected, why, you'd just have to lump it.

GRAFT

I had expected a Serbian welcome in Iraq, but from the very first they greeted me warmly when they learned that I was from America. Oh, I haven't completely forgotten the soldier who playfully pressed his machine gun to my heart and pulled the trigger, the tea-shop proprietor who, after I photographed his little child with his permission, suddenly began shouting that I was a Jew spying for the Israeli intelligence service Mossad, the butcher who shook his bloody knife at me when I asked to take his portrait. —"Russia?" inquired a crowd in Saddam City. "Nope," I said with a grin. "America. *Taskot America.* Down with America"—because there that slogan was, right on the wall behind me. One man smiled, but the rest awarded me sullen glares. They were exceptions. Most Iraqis posed happily, gave me ice cream and cake; in the barbershop everyone insisted that I go to the head of the line, and afterward I had to insist on paying. This was how it was going to be, and I believed that as soon as I'd crossed the border into Iraq, because border officials tend toward sternness, and if this lot was so friendly, why shouldn't everyone else be? I was reassured. Slow, chatty queues beneath the cloudy sky subjected themselves to the desultory processes of legal entry. A line of parked and empty vehicles blocked the road—benzene tankers, every one of which slowly leaked. As a foreigner, I had to pay fifty US dollars to take an AIDS test with what appeared to be a dirty needle, but the official at the health office proved as friendly as everybody else: he could help me, were a gift to be arranged. The fairest gift, I decided, was exactly fifty dollars, and he was ecstatic. The blue-inked stamp thumped down on the back of my visa slip (which the Iraqi mission in Washington, considerately wishing, as I suppose, to avoid causing me difficulties with my own government, had refrained from affixing to my passport). As we left the complex of cement-block offices, a man I had never seen before approached the driver and me and said: For service. The driver peeled off a wad of Saddams. The official looked expectantly at me, so with great pleasure I presented him with five dollars' worth. I could tell by then that this was how Iraq would be: free ice cream cones from one faction, and nonstop "service," nonstop baksheesh from the other.

My driver in Baghdad was a master of expensive restaurants. I'd tell him to take

me someplace cheap and he'd bring me to another marble-floored palace with tinseled walls, eight plates of appetizers, sesame-studded frybread, humus with olives of all hues, cucumber relish. Then came the main course—many more plates, succulent lamb on the bone with rice and raisins, side dishes of eggplant, potato. My driver sent his lamb back because it was too gamy. He changed tables because the light hurt his eyes. He sent the bread back because it was burned in one tiny spot. Was he having the time of his life, or was this his accustomed life? I met his family, who were poor; his flat was hot and dingy. He'd lost his old home after the Americans killed his father in the Gulf War. Maybe he just wanted his own back. Maybe he was a businessman, a survivor. He had many good qualities; he was honest; but he hounded me with innocent greed, always hitting me up for my breakfast vouchers at the hotel, or begging from my hospital donation supply a five-hundred pack of vitamins, or snatching for himself one of the packages of candy I'd brought for the children. My pen ran dry, and he took it; maybe he could scrounge a new ink cartridge somewhere, he said. At his restaurants there was always too much to eat, and it cost a fortune: five or seven dollars. I said to him: "Are you taking the leftovers home to your family?" He looked me in the eye and said yes. He had a self-satisfied smile. Then he sat smoking a cigarette, looking away from me. I wondered whether he did take it to his family or whether he sold it. I never found out.

Was he so abnormal? I saw a crowded blue bus one morning in Baghdad; and, laughing, an Iraqi told me that it was war booty from Kuwait; it would never go back. (The UN estimated that half of Kuwait's trucks and buses had been ruined or stolen by Iraq.)[14] As for Saddam Hussein, he used public resources to construct mini-cities for his relatives. And, for that matter, the UN tithed Iraq to pay the expenses of embargoing it. The well-connected and the unconnected often express common philosophies of accumulation.

MONITORING WITHOUT TEARS

Richard Butler, the Chairman of the UN Special Committee whose headquarters high up in the Secretariat building in New York sports its very own keypad-locked SECURE ROOM by whose doorway hangs a photo of UNSCOM's U-2 spy plane, while staffers breeze in and out of doorways, checking their voice mail: "Enter your UN security code. You have—ONE—new message"—Richard Butler, as I was saying, may not be a household name in my country, but he is possibly the most hated man in Iraq. Saddam Hussein certainly possesses his detractors, and Presidents Bush and Clinton are known as "the criminals," but Butler has been scapegoat-sculpted into an almost archetypal strangler. They say he's the one who keeps the UN's fingers around Iraq's throat. "When I meet him I kill him," said my driver. "Come to Baghdad, talk good. Come outside, no talk no good!"

"I have absolutely nothing to do with sanctions," Butler insisted to me, perhaps

disingenuously, since his job, UNSCOM's job, was to employ helicopters, document-collators, remote cameras and heat sensors "to verify that pesticide factories are making pesticides" (thus says his assistant, the goodnatured and silver-tongued Mr. Ewen Buchanan), and until that verification satisfied UNSCOM, the sanctions would presumably remain.

In her hot, dreary two-room flat in Baghdad (kitchen outside in the hall), with faded prints of some snowy country on the wall, a woman listened when I read back from my notebook these words of Butler's, "I have absolutely nothing to do with sanctions," and then the woman said: "Allah will help the people of Iraq." She had been widowed three years now. The Kurds had murdered the husband, who'd been a driver in the north. She insisted that her husband had never carried a gun or hurt anyone. She'd decided not to marry again, for her two children's sake. Her daughter, just old enough to learn tic-tac-toe, could already in a low shy monotone recite from the Qur'-An. What did these facts have to do with Richard Butler or UNSCOM? When she invoked recourse in Allah against the sanctions, which her mind personified, simply and falsely, as Butler's sanctions, she was in essence labeling Butler false for taking no responsibility for her nation's misery.

Indeed, he took no responsibility. Nor did anyone else at UNSCOM, it seemed. When I asked Ewen Buchanan where he personally drew the line between threat prevention and the rape of Iraqi sovereignty, he replied, "We are a subsidiary body, responsible for technical questions. These bigger questions are not for us." Had Butler been willing to engage himself, expressing a moral position which I might have agreed with or rejected, I might have respected him more. People said that he had in fact already gotten his fingers burned for speaking out politically, so fair enough, perhaps; I'm sure his job description was damned-if-you-do-damned-if-you-don't. But surely the UNSCOM position, were it defensible, ought to be defended, not merely deflected. Deflected it was, always. In Baghdad, the affable, calm old Swedish Major General, Nils Carlström, who was UNSCOM's director of monitoring and verification, with his forty inspectors, forty technicians, and forty Chilean helicopter-tenders remained too canny to go beyond "I like it very much" and "it's a big challenge" and "ask the Chairman"—that is, Richard Butler.

WHAT THEY FOUND

"That's not evasive," continued the man who had absolutely nothing to do with sanctions. "The UN is responsible for the disarmament of Iraq, and responsible to see that it doesn't re-create the weapons of mass destruction it produced in such quantity and quality in the past. The fact is that Iraq has never participated honestly in the three-step process of declaration, verification and destruction of illegal weapons."

That was unassailably true, even though everybody I met in Iraq told me otherwise—the Baghdad lawyer, for instance, a staunch pro-Saddam man who told me,

"For me, Mr. William, the inspectors are unqualified. Just last year we caught two big boxes being smuggled by one of the teams—antiquities, prohibited for export. They were stealing! If you are qualified people, why can't you complete your mission in eight years? If I go through a customs checkpoint and the government has some information that I have prohibited items, OK. But if the inspector finds nothing, what should he do? Check me two or three times, OK. And then?" —Perhaps he actually believed this. (Could it be what Iraqi television said?) The woman who invoked Allah against Butler certainly did, and so did my driver, and likewise the man in Saddam City who called America "a big problem for the world." But UNSCOM, both more busy and more effective than Iraqis like to admit, has destroyed a supergun and the components of four others, hundreds of missiles, launch pads and the like, almost half a million liters of chemical warfare agents, "biological seed stocks" for biological warfare...[15] The UN Blue Book on Iraq mentions secret nuclear weapons programs, including 208 "irradiated fuel assemblies" of enriched uranium, which the International Atomic Energy Agency sent back to Russia where they came from,[16] a "chemical weapons complex" meant to produce sarin, tabun, VX and mustard gas, biological weapons facilities involving anthrax and botulinum, and long range missiles, linked to a space reentry program.[17] Just last October, UNSCOM poured concrete into glass-lined tanks used for chemical warfare corrosives. "The Iraqis have an elaborate system of avoiding detection by us," Buchanan said.

In short, Butler, Buchanan, Carlström and all the rest had accomplishments to point to. If we associate them personally with a certain narrowness of moral focus, at least as expressed in their dealings with the media, that saddens me but it is understandable; it is characteristic of people in administrative or technical professions—and it most likely is mandated by UNSCOM's guidelines for public utterances. Buchanan in particular struck me as a sensitive man with a lot to say, could he but say it. So my complaint lies less with any of them or with UNSCOM itself than with the sanctions themselves, which are so harsh that it ought to be the business of everybody even remotely involved in administering them to justify them publicly, repeatedly, and with eloquence.

Maybe the embargo was well-intentioned, although I doubted it. It did not seem to be accomplishing its stated ends very quickly. Indeed, the length of it was scandalous. And what were its ends exactly? The notion that stern domination of a country can prevent its evil resurgence did not work against Germany after World War I. It will not work here. It will succeed only in creating and hardening new enemies for America and her sister powers. Sooner or later, some Iraqi clever enough to build a destructive device will try again, and his hatred will not be restrained by memories of our kindness. "Some say lifting the sanctions would make Saddam stronger," said Rabih Aridi, the Amnesty International spokesman. "The only reason thousands of families are escaping Iraq right now is because Saddam Hussein

does not have the means to stop them, due to the sanctions." But I thought of the children in the hospitals, and wanted to lift the sanctions just the same.

UNSCOM'S INFINITE LIST

Butler gave me about ten minutes of his time. He was not well, I was a small fish, and he had an appointment with BBC Television. So I hastily asked him whether he had any main theme which I could help convey.

"Just point out that the way this whole business was set up was that the Security Council put a heavy law on Iraq," he said. "To back it up, they imposed sanctions on Iraq, which apparently had a heavy weight on ordinary people. Iraq could always stop that weight. No matter whether the Iraqi government ought to stop the weapons of mass destruction, it's unconscionable. Come clean, and it's all over."

And Buchanan, who took me into his office and generously gave me all the time I wanted, insisted: "The only link we have with sanctions is that when Iraq takes all steps so that we can verify its claims, the embargo will have no more force."

But how would those claims be verified? How long would it take? "If the Commission presented Iraq with a finite list" of hurdles to clear, blandly explains Security Council document S/1998/332, "it is not unreasonable to consider that Iraq might take action to satisfy only that list positively, thus leaving aside other relevant materials known to it but possibly not known to the Commission... Iraq should submit its truth for verification by the Commission, not the reverse."[18] And so UNSCOM could continue the verification process as long as it liked. Grant that the Iraqi government lied and obstructed, that it intimidated UNSCOM's hated inspectors when it could, that it therefore bore a considerable portion of the blame for the continuation of sanctions—if the UN Security Council should lift the embargo before Iraq had completely "come clean," as Butler put it, then Saddam Hussein would have scored a dangerous victory, and proven that defiance of the UN could pay. What then? Why wouldn't conventional deterrents be enough? Hadn't the Gulf War shown Saddam what would happen if he invaded Kuwait again?

Grant also, as I said, that UNSCOM's inspectors were themselves most likely trying to do the best job they could. In Baghdad I was allowed to interview some of them in a conference room on the condition that I ask no personal questions and that the session not exceed fifteen minutes.[19] From the interview I obtained a blurry impression of some decent-seeming, hardworking, intelligent people who believed that they were doing a good thing. Maybe it was a good thing, but the spectacle of the pediatric hospital remained for me an unanswerable counterargument. When I first talked with Buchanan, an intelligent, personable, helpful man whom I liked, the project of sensing, monitoring, verifying and destroying seemed only technically fascinating, because I had no strong opinions about Iraq. Later, it began to seem

almost monstrous. How long would the sanctions go on? "And we are monitoring hundreds of sites around Iraq," said Major General Carlström. "It is my belief that the Council will keep that system for many years."

I wondered if this would be the wave of the future, if the UN, the big boys, the developed nations, the nuclear club, would spy on all the have-not nations of the world in workplaces and palaces and anywhere else they chose, without appeal, for an indefinite duration, and meanwhile charge them millions of dollars for the privilege, and also starve them. It was arrogant far beyond cruelty.

"Why is Iraq such a unique case?" I asked.

"No, I'm only saying that our *mandate* is unique," Carlström said. "As for Iraq, I'm not discussing that. Ask the Chairman."

But I already had.

The only body left to ask was the Security Council, but that shadowy and divided body, whose chairmanship changed every month, would only have given me as many opinions as there were nation-members (assuming that anybody bothered to answer me at all). There was nobody to ask.

"A VERY COMPLEX OPERATION"

Mr. Eric Falt, the spokesman for UNOHCI (which is not a variety of Italian pasta but actually an acronym for the Office of the Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq), was a pleasing man who was proud of the local art he'd hung on his walls there within the barbed wire island of the Canal Hotel, a clean, climate-controlled place where the embargo did not apply and so all appliances functioned. By the time I met Falt, I'd seen a few hospitals and schools, and so I was not feeling very good about what the United Nations was doing in Iraq. I told him that I genuinely believed in the nobility of the UN as an idea. I wanted to give the UN good press. I begged him to help me do that.

Falt was on the side of the angels. His mission was not to strangle Iraq, but to send a few puffs of prepaid oxygen in the direction of the choking, wheezing patient. He began by explaining how the new[20] Oil For Food program worked. "It's got to be the most complex one that the UN has ever organized," he said, and I wondered whether he was proud of the complexity. With considerable facility he drew circles, triangles, spiders, rays, arrows and constellations on sheets of paper, so that I could understand the administrative hierarchy with its international participants, inputs and outputs. At the moment the Security Council allowed Iraq to export $2 billion worth of oil, in exchange for $1.3 billion worth of wheat, sugar, rice and other staples. In other words, for every dollar which Iraq was permitted to spend, it got about sixty-six cents' worth of value. Where did the rest go? Well, $16 million paid for UNSCOM, $600 million went to compensate Kuwait, $44 million went to "operational costs" such as "bank-related charges for the Iraq account," and $20 mil-

lion went to escrow payments.[21] We might consider all this to be something like a colossal charge on an automated bank transaction.

And now Falt took another piece of paper and drew vertical lines on it, dividing it into the procedural compartments which oil and food had to pass through before they could be exchanged. He kept using the phrase "a very complex operation." And indeed it was. It took five weeks for the oil to bleed out of Iraq's pipeline, and then after that a letter of credit had to be issued ("of course Iraq doesn't see the color of the money," Falt explained), and then the Security Council had to approve the delivery. Only three vertical lines had been breached. After that came delivery itself. "Think of wheat coming from Australia," said Falt. "It takes one week just to load. And another five weeks to arrive. That's if they don't have a dockers' strike, which at the moment they do. And then finally you have distribution within Iraq itself. I would like to argue forcefully that given these constraints we are doing very well."

And his busy hands rushed on. "Five million metrics tons have been distributed in the last year," he said. He took his calculator and pecked at the keys with a pencil. "That's three hundred kilograms of foodstuffs per person per year—far better than in North Korea. And we monitor the access, and we can report that 99.5 percent of the population is provided with equal access to the food basket."

"Are you saying they're eating well enough?" I asked.

"No. I'm not saying that. Let's not forget the goal of the operation. We have *not* been asked to launch a Marshall Plan for Iraq. We have been asked only to prevent *further deterioration.*"

My flesh began to crawl.

"We quickly realized that the $1.3 billion is not enough to prevent further deterioration. It gives them two thousand calories per person per day,[22] and an ideal minimum level would be two thousand five hundred. We calculate that our food baskets, delivered monthly, last approximately three weeks, which goes down to two weeks for the poorest families."

"And medicine?"

"Prior to 1991, Iraq was making available—I don't say spending—about $30 on drugs and medicine per person per year. By 1995-96, that figure had decreased to $2 or $3 per person per year. The World Health Organization target for this region is $30 to $35 per person per year."

I sat for awhile, taking all this in. Falt seemed to be an honest, clearsighted man. Unlike so many others, he didn't obfuscate or pass the buck. He seemed to be doing his best with the resources he had. It wasn't his fault that he couldn't do better.

"We need a lot more resources," he said, "maybe $3.4 billion worth of Iraqi oil, and it's doubtful that we could stabilize them even with that. They have suffered extensively over the last seven years, and there is no miracle cure. Not until the sanctions are lifted. And we don't know that the Security Council will approve it."

"And how do you feel about all this, Mr. Falt?" I said. "I have to admit that it breaks my heart."

"Well, yes," Falt said after a pause. "It affects all of our people immensely, and we have the highest turnover rate of any UN mission. I'm a bit protected. I don't go out in the field that much. But the things that people tell me..."

I hated to make him uncomfortable. He was being fair and decent with me. But precisely because I felt I could trust him, I told him what he surely already knew, that Iraqis hated the UN, that they made no distinction between UNSCOM, the Security Council and the rest.

"There are two different sides to the work of the UN," he reminded me. "And I will not comment on the work of my UN colleagues."

He saw me out as far as the base of the stairs. And there I noticed the model food basket on display. It looked pitiful. "Mr. Falt," I said, "may I take your photograph beside this food basket?"

Maybe I'd scared him, or maybe he was just sick of me by then. He'd just returned from leave; he was tired; he'd seen me at short notice. "No," he said. "I do not court this kind of publicity."

After he had left, I took a photograph of the food basket alone behind its glass.

A UN guy came up to me and gleefully wagged a finger, cackling: "Illegal!" Then I remembered that you were not supposed to take photographs inside the Canal Hotel.

OIL

Was it all about oil? Iraq is, after all, the country where gasoline literally runs like water.[23] Before the embargo, it was the second-largest oil producer in the world. Petrol! Benzene! They splash it about in puddles when they siphon it from their fuel-inefficient old American cars. They let it sink back into the dirt it came from. They use it like water, idling their engines for half an hour at a time because every time you switch the ignition on or off you stress something, and under sanctions gas remains unexhausted but spark plugs are getting hard to replace. Oil! Gas spurts joyously from the pumps at filling stations, maybe because gaskets don't seal anymore, maybe because no one cares. On the road or in the city one usually smells it. The smell of Cambodia is of sandalwood. The smell of wartime Bosnia is of scorched steel. The smell of Iraq is the smell of gas.